



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974-097X • Vol 16. No. 1 • January - June 2020



Pilate Dead: The Lone Warrior in Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon* - A Study

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Introduction

Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* reflects much of her biographical information. The very idea of the novel is paying tribute to the ancestors; it is none other than Morrison's grandfather John Willis is source of the novel. Since it was written after the death of her father, it focuses more on male characters; Macon Dead, Jack, Milkman, Guitar Bain and the seven days men. In this context, Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin opine, "*Song of Solomon* can be singled out as showcasing black men" (4). Milkman's quest for his identity is the dominant thread of the novel, the major obstacle he must overcome is the deadening effects of his father's need to own as much property as possible in order to protect him from racism. Milkman is accidentally propelled to search for his true self in pursuit of gold. The journey leads him back through his personal past to a racial history that had been vehemently opposed to materialism and greed. It also tells about the desire for wealth and property so as to compete with white people. Morrison, in this novel attempts to say how black people's imitation of whites keeps them wealth but spoils their familial relationship. Milkman, First Corinthians, Magdalene, Ruth Foster and Pilate are the victims of Macon Dead's quest for material fulfillment. At this juncture, Pilate Dead acts as a lone warrior to strengthen the family bond, in this combat, she succeeds by sacrificing her life.

In this novel, Pilate is like a picaresque novel hero; she is adventurous, travels wide in search of her brother and comes across so many places and encounters so many people, nowhere she finds a relationship that compensates the loss of her father except an island man with whom she manages to have her pregnancy. Though Pilate has good opinion on her husband, she does not want to continue her relationship with him fearing the revelation of her 'no-navelness' to her husband. So her father is the only solace for her life. From this, one can understand the predominance of father-daughter relationship in *Song of Solomon*

Macon Dead was initially very affectionate to her, Pilate somehow felt compensated for the loss of her father and mother by the utmost care of Macon Dead. He was with her up to her sixteenth year. After that a small incident separated them, it was when they were hiding themselves in a cave, a white man entered the cave with a sack full of gold, Macon was afraid of the white man's presence as he was already panicked by the murder of his father by a white man. In the combat to protect himself and Pilate from the white man, he stabs him with a knife and escapes from the cave. From then onwards they are separated, Pilate starts leading a wandering life and she travels place to place in search of her brother.

After coming to the place where Macon lives, she is very much disappointed by the rudeness and hatred of Macon. She is puzzled to know about her brother's money mindedness; moreover she comes to

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know that he hates her for not cooperating with him while fighting with the white man in the cave. However she decides to make no more moves from there, she decides to lead her life with the confidence that she is near her brother. Macon hates Pilate for her dressing like a man, her profession to sell liquor and her ugly looking but Pilate does not mind what her brother is all about. Trudier Harris's saying expresses the deep-rooted brother-sister relationship,

Although Pilate and Macon have been estranged for years, she nevertheless finds her way, finally, to her only other living relative. That means more to her than remembering whatever it was that initially separated them. She and Macon are not completely reconciled, but she has at least made the effort to find him and move near him....Macon and Pilate, and Pilate and Ruth, have shared traumas of existence that make failures to socialize or petty squabbling inaccurate measures of the depth of their relationships.(12)

she understands that her brother's present state of mind is because of the impact of her father's murder. She makes no attempt to explain what happened with her after he left the cave, but she believes a day will come to reveal everything.

Pilate, despite being younger than Macon, acts very matured, she is ready to experience whatever comes to her, she has been disappointed by many things from her birth onwards: the death of her mother, her naming, her 'no-navelness', her father's murder, her brother's disappearance, orphaned at her young age, husbandless life, loneliness during pregnancy, a vagabond life, her consciousness to hide her 'no-navelness' from her sexual partner, seclusion from the society, Hagar's death and many more. In spite of all, she manages her life, engages her dependents in happiness, keeps to her promises, longs to be mingled with the people and gives her happiness to others. But Macon, on the other hand, quite opposite to her, engages his house with bitterness, scares the females in his family and they are the royal victims; their house is filled with facilities but deprived of feelings. People come to Pilate's house to share their feelings, whereas Macon's people try to escape from his house to share their feelings. Happiness or sadness are nothing to her, both are an experience, "When I am happy and when I am sad and what is the difference?" (SOS 149).

Macon's hatred for his sister is further induced by the knowledge that Milkman is born with the help of Pilate's trick, and Milkman's regular visit to Pilate's house. He fears that his son will be spoiled by Pilate's attitude, in reality this is where he felt freed from all his familial problems. He is away from hearing the shameful stories of his parents and the rivalry of his sisters. Pilate came in search of her brother, so that she can get her daughter and granddaughter a good relationship with her brother's family, on contrary, she gives a good relationship for Macon's son, she also gives a friendly care to Ruth.

For Milkman, Pilate is more than an aunt; she is the creator and saviour of Milkman. Milkman feels freed in Pilate's house, he finds a receiver to express his feelings. He enjoys the generosity of Pilate, simplicity of Reba and appealing beauty of the back of Hagar. He is so happy with simple dishes along with intoxicating liquor prepared by Pilate. Though Pilate knows Milkman's selfishness, she does not ill-treat him for that. She treats him as his son. When milkman with the company of Guitar was caught by the police while running away with the stolen green sack from Pilate's house, she forgives him and comes to rescue him by saying that the bone kept in the sack belongs to her husband. Even after this benevolent act of Pilate, Milkman and Macon fail to understand her kindness towards her brother and his son, they continue suspecting her for hiding the gold of the white man whom Macon stabbed in the cave. Macon further urges his son to go in search of the gold, he also instructs him to knock Pilate down if she crosses his way.

To knock down an old black lady who had cooked him his first perfect egg, who had shown him the sky, the blue of it, which was like her mother's ribbons ... She had told him stories, sung him songs, fed him bananas and corn bread ... It was this woman, whom he would have knocked senseless, who shuffled into the police station and did a little number for the cops—opening herself up wide for their amusement, their pity, their scorn, their mockery,

their disbelief, their meanness, their whimsy, their annoyance, their power, their anger, their boredom—whatever would be useful to her and to himself. (SOS 209-10)

In spite of the brutal behaviour of his brother and Milkman, Pilate continues to shower her kindness on them. When Hagar attempted to kill Milkman out of depression, Ruth requests Pilate to stop Hagar from killing his son. Pilate assures Ruth that her son will not be killed by any woman. Milkman's life is always through risks; by his own father, Hagar, Guitar and the police, in all his risks, Pilate saves him. From these actions, it is apparent that she has been the creator, redeemer but never been a destroyer.

Pilate is very strong, at the same time very intelligent too. She knows her weakness, but she does not mourn for that, rather she knows the art of hiding her weakness. She never prejudices with anybody, she has her own style of living. She never depends on anyone, she is a male-like character, she dresses up like men, and she is more courageous to face any hurdles in her life.

Pilate's 'no-navelness' makes the people wonder, at the same time, mock at her, sometimes they compare herself with snake as it does not have navel. Though her 'no-navelness' symbolizes that she is cut off from all her relationship from the childhood onwards, but according to Trudier Harris, "Her lack of a navel symbolizes her external mothering role"(11) she is an ocean to receive and preserve all the streams of relationship. Her house is untidy, poorly furnished, filled with liquor and smell of some rotten vegetables, but this is where people find solace. It is a refuge for those who are tired of their routine works and bored with social customs.

Pilate, Reba and Hagar are not socially recognized, no neighbour visits their house either for giving or for getting anything. Her house is engaged with some drunkards and they are the regular visitors. Though they are cut off from the society, they live a happy life, they do not bother about what others say, and they live on their own. Fear comes to her house only when her daughter was harassed by one of her suitors; sorrow comes to her only when Hagar passed away out of the depression of her love failure. Her house becomes gloomy when Pilate passed away. Pilate, besides being a courageous woman, is a caring mother too; she goes up to any extreme to save her daughter. When Reba's new lover harassed her, Pilate rages against him, she makes him move at the point of a knife against his heart and this reminds one Sethe in *Beloved* how she reacted when the slave catchers came.

For a mother, children are more than her husband, though Pilate is portrayed like a male-like character, she has the motherly softness in her heart. She acted like a male for the outside world to struggle with the social injustices, in her true self, she is a perfect mother, and she works, cooks, washes for her children. She does not act like a conventional mother. She gives a complete freedom to Reba. Though there is less conversation between Reba and Pilate, much understanding prevails.

From the above statements, it is proved that Pilate's house is filled with healthy feelings. Pilate, Reba and Hagar enjoyed their life until before Milkman and Guitar entered there and after their entry, they faced some problems created by Milkman. First when Milkman and Guitar planned to steal the green sack assuming that the gold is in the sack, secondly, when Milkman and Hagar's love affair came to an end very shortly, and thirdly, when Guitar shot Pilate 'Dead'. Otherwise they were leading a happy and peaceful life with their available things. The true love and thick relationship which are missing in Macon's house are present in Pilate's house. Reba and Hagar felt as if they were in the safety zone as long as there was no interference of any kinsmen.

Morrison's mother characters are given challenging situations to protect their children, many times they succeed, sometimes due to an undone situation, they happen to be blamed for their inept actions, in this sense, Pilate is also given an inevitable situation, in which, she and Reba remain crippled to fulfil the need of Hagar, when she suffers because of her love failure, she turns out to be mentally disturbed and very violent, at that moment, to keep the promise given to Milkman's mother, Ruth; Milkman will not be killed by any woman rather he would be saved by a woman.

Conclusion

Pilate's objective to find out her brother's residence is to give her dependents a good relationship. But it is a disappointment to her since Macon's attitudinal change that hates people and loves money. When she finds him after long search, she is disappointed by his behaviour, even then she does not want to make any further move from her brother, she wants to continue her remaining life with the feeling that she is near her brother. Pilate does not want him to do any favour for her, but she wants to give something in favour of her brother's family. In that sense, she saves Milkman at the risk of her life, she has been a good guide to Ruth Foster when she is disturbed by Macon's ill-treatment, and she gives Macon himself a change in his character by scarifying her life. Hence this paper concludes by reinstating the title that she is a lone warrior to protect the family bond.

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